

**Proceedings of the Fifth National Conference
on
Private Higher Education
Institutions (PHEIs) in Ethiopia**

***Major Theme: Private Higher Education in Ethiopia
at the turn of the Ethiopian
Millennium***

**Organized & Sponsored
By
St. Mary's University College
August 25, 2007
UN Conference Center
Addis Ababa
Ethiopia**

An Evaluation of the Implementation of Continuous Assessment (CA): The Case of St. Mary's University College

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Abstract

Students' achievement might not be fully measured through a single or a couple of written tests (examinations). Various types of assessment methods should be in place. Alternative ways of assessing students take into account variation in students' needs, interests and learning styles (Shaaban, 2001). The objective of this study is to evaluate the practices of continuous assessment at St. Mary's University College. To this end, data were collected through questionnaire, document analysis and interview. The results of the study showed that teachers appeared to have good perceptions about CA but they did not use various tools of CA; instead they relied on the traditional modes of measuring students i.e., testing. Conclusions were drawn on the basis of the results obtained.

Introduction

The traditional paper-and-pencil tests no longer cover the variety of activities and tasks in the classroom situation. As a result, the field of evaluation has witnessed a major shift from strictly summative testing tools and procedures to a more humanistic approach using informal assessment techniques that stress formative evaluation (O'Neil, 1992, as cited by Shaaban, 2001).

Unlike terminal assessment which is carried out at the end of a course or a major unit for summative purpose, continuous assessment is done on an on-going basis while students are actually working their way through the course or major unit (Singer 2003). That is, it is the process of gathering appropriate information regularly for making educational decisions (Nitko, 2004). Obviously, to make such decisions, we need to use high-quality information- information that is highly valid and highly reliable for the decisions at hand (Nitko, 2004).

Assessment serves a variety of functions in the classroom situation. To mention but few, it measures student achievements, provides a means of feedback to the teacher and students, motivates and directs student learning, helps to evaluate teaching methods, and is a useful means of over learning (Ebel, 1979; Hopkings and Stanley, 1981).

In doing so, there are different types of continuous assessment tools or techniques. These are tests, assignments, examination, quiz, projects, presentations, questioning, participations in class, group reflections, discussions, portfolio assessment, term paper, self-assessment, observation, interview, peer assessment, attendance, role-playing, fieldwork /practical work, homework and the like.

Continuous assessment is process-oriented, learner-involved and self-referenced in nature. In other words, continuous assessment has the following characteristics (AED /BESO II, 2006).

- *It is an ongoing process of gathering information about students' learning progress.*
- *It uses a variety of assessment techniques.*
- *It provides timely feedback to students about what they need to improve their learning.*
- *It is aligned with curriculum goals and objectives.*

To conduct an effective and appropriate continuous assessment, the following conditions are mandatory (Shepard, 2000).

- *The teacher must be equipped with an adequate knowledge and capability about different assessment techniques.*
- *The assessment activity should be planned.*

- *The assessment procedure should be based on the actual condition, social factors of the class, and pupils' level of knowledge and the nature of instruction.*
- *Variety of assessment techniques should be selected and applied.*
- *There should be up to date record keeping.*

In line with this, Singer (2003) stated the following points as advantages of continuous assessment:

- *It provides an on-going picture of how individual students develop and mature as they work their way through a course.*
- *It places less emphasis on pure memory than terminal assessment.*
- *It encourages regular, systematic study and discourages last-minute cramming.*
- *It provides early warnings of which students are having problems with a course.*
- *It can provide early indicators of the likely performance of students.*
- *It renders warning of any problems or weaknesses, thus enabling them to take appropriate measures to improve matters.*
- *It reduces the intense stress that many students experience when preparing for and sitting terminal examinations.*
- *It provides a more natural assessment environment that is better matched to the situations in which students will find themselves working in later life.*

To this end, utilizing continuous assessment is of paramount importance to obtain reliable and valid information since traditional one-off exam leads teachers to make an erroneous decision. In view of the points stated above, the issue of continuous assessment is imperative in the educational setting since it renders regular information about the teaching process and it is vital to judge the quality of an individual's work.

As a result, the issue of continuous assessment like active learning and Higher Diploma Program has got much attention in the Ethiopian education scene. Even in the policy document, it was stated as one of the objectives of teacher education in Ethiopia (MoE, 2003). In view of this, continuous assessment has been regarded as an integral part of teaching. Owing to this, the main aim of this research work was to look into the practice of continuous assessment at St. Mary's University College.

Methodology

In St. Mary's University College (SMUC), the total number of lecturers in the regular program is more than one hundred fifty. Of the total number, forty lecturers participated in the study. The majority of the lecturers (85%) were MA holders whereas the remaining (15%) were first-degree holders. Again, the majority of the lecturers (75%) have had education background. In addition to the lecturers, department heads took part in the study. Survey Questionnaire was administered to secure relevant data. The questionnaire was both open and close-ended. In addition to the questionnaire, two interviews were conducted to gather information from department heads.

The data were then coded, categorized, organized and carefully analyzed. In analyzing the data, descriptive statistics were used to describe the outputs.

Results and Discussion

As shown in the table one, most lecturers (50% +40%) believed that continuous assessment is beyond testing. And the majority of the lecturers (45%+10%) considered continuous assessment to be more than giving paper/pencil tests. This showed that the majority of the instructors seem to have good understanding regarding the concept of continuous assessment. This finding does not corroborate with similar findings made in other

institutions. The findings of Muluken (2006) revealed that his respondents considered continuous assessment as simply giving series of tests for pupils to measure their performance. Furthermore, the finding of Mulu (2005) as cited by Muluken (2006) found out that continuous assessment is interpreted by instructors of AAU as continuous testing. This difference arose due to the fact that, at St. Mary's University College, various workshop, training and seminar have been given for the staff that enlightened the instructors about the concept of continuous assessment.

Table 1: Instructors' perceptions about continuous assessment

Items	Number of respondents and percentage					
	Strongly agree	Agree	Have no idea	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No response
I believe that continuous assessment is beyond testing	20 50%	16 40%	2 5%	-	-	2 5%
I consider continuous assessment as merely giving paper /pencil tests	4 10%	6 15%	6 15%	18 45%	4 10%	2 5%
I feel that using continuous assessment improves pupil's learning through feedback.	28 70%	2 5%	8 20%	- -	- -	2 5%

Most instructors (70%+5%=75%) felt that continuous assessment improves pupils' learning through feedback (table 1). Contrary to this, the findings of Seyum (2006) revealed that students receive feedback from instructors only in the form of grades and, the majority of instructors are not willing to show the results of the students. Absence of smooth interpersonal relationship between students and teachers might minimize the students' comfort zone and hinder them to know about their progress. It is a fact that providing students with regular feedback on how they are doing is an essential part of the education process.

Table 2: Instructors' perception regarding the function of continuous assessment

Items	Number of respondents and percentage					
	Strongly agree	Agree	Have no idea	Dis-agree	Strongly Disagree	No response
I believe that continuous assessment motivates student's learning.	12 30%	20 50%	2 5%	- -	- -	6 15%
Continuous assessment enables me to review or correct my teaching methods and the instructional materials as well.	8 20%	20 50%	4 10%	4 10%	- -	4 10%
Continuous assessment is used only to grade students.	- -	2 5%	2 5%	26 65%	4 10%	6 15%

Most instructors (80%) believed that continuous assessment motivates students to learn (table 2). It was repeatedly indicated that continuous assessment encourages students to learn more and the teacher to work on the refinement of the process of learning rather than its product (Shaaban, 2001). This finding is in contradiction to the results of Seyum (2006). Seyum reported that motivating students on the assessment result is not much important because students are considered to be adult. Regardless of the learners' age, motivation that is an internal state that arouses, directs and maintains behavior, is important to success.

The majority of the instructors (70%) stated that continuous assessment enabled them to review their teaching methods (table 2). Assessment tools and procedures are essential for evaluating students' progress and achievement and, moreover, it also helps to evaluate the suitability and effectiveness of the curriculum, the teaching methodology and the instruction (Shaaban, 2001).

The majority of the instructors (65%) indicated that continuous assessment has diverse functions in addition to grading students. Contrary to this, a substantial number of instructors in Dilla College of Teacher Education indicated that they are using continuous

assessment results only for grading students (Seyum, 2006). If learners could not consider assessment as an integral part of the teaching-learning process and if the purpose of assessment is to judge their abilities in relation to their classmates, the assessment procedure can cause a great deal of anxiety that affects students' learning and self image (Shaaban, 2001).

All instructors stated that they have been frequently measuring their students' performance. However, the result revealed that the majority of the instructors (77.5%) provided two or three tests as assessments for a course in a semester (table 3). All instructors (100%) indicated that they were frequently measuring their students' performance. But this is not observed in the response given in table three. Providing two or three tests could not be considered as continuous assessment. Singer (2003) stated that continuous assessment can take place in the form of daily work (e.g. essays, quizzes, presentation, participation in class projects/term papers and practical work). In the same vein, Muluken (2006) citing Farant (1980) contended that continuous assessment is practiced on a day-to-day basis to judge the quality of the individuals' performance. This being the case, two or three tests or number of assessment could not be considered as continuous assessment. Here, it should be understood that continuous assessment is an integral part of the learning process.

Table 3: Numbers of assessments/tests/ given for a course in a semester

Question	Responses & No of respondents with percentage				
	Once in a semester	2-3 in a semester	4-5 in a semester	6-7 in a semester	More than seven
How often do you give periodic testing or assessment?	–	31 77.5%	5 12.5%	3 7.5%	1 2.5%

In the open-ended responses, most instructors reported that *large class size; Shortage of time; lack of commitment; tight schedule; broad course content* and *teaching load* hamper the implementation of continuous assessment. However, all the respondents (100%)

reported that they used various tools or techniques of continuous assessment, although the techniques in table 4 below might not be in line with the point at hand.

Table 4: Tools of continuous assessment frequently employed by instructors (from very high to very low frequency)

Techniques of CA	Very high				Rank				Very low	
	1		2		3		4		5	
	N0.	%	N0.	%	N0.	%	N0.	%	N0.	%
Tests	38	95	2	5%	-	-	-	-	-	-
Assignments	28	70%	7	17.5%	3	7.5%	2	5%	-	-
Examination	26	65%	9	22.5%	3	7.5%	-	-	-	-
Quizzes	20	50%	6	15%	-	-	-	-	-	-
Projects	20	50%	8	20%	-	-	-	-	-	-
Presentations	14	35%	-	-	2	5%	-	-	-	-
Questioning	10	25%	20	50%	-	-	-	-	-	-
Participations	8	20%	-	-	1	2.5%	-	-	-	-
Group reflections	6	15%	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Discussions	2	5%	1	2.5%	-	-	-	-	-	--
Portfolio assessment	1	2.5%	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Term paper	1	2.5%	-	-	3	7.5%	-	-	-	-

All the respondents (100%) stated that they employed various tools of continuous assessment; however, Table 4 shows that subjects used few types of tools, of which tests are dominated. This finding was in line with the results of Muluken (2006) and Seyum (2006). The majority of the respondents, in Muluken's and Seyum's studies, considered continuous assessment as simply giving series of tests for pupils to measure their performance. Needless to say, tests alone cannot measure the innermost competence of students, thus, using one or two types of continuous assessment tools might not give the real picture of the students' performance. Teachers' reliance on testing denies many learners the opportunity to demonstrate their true potential (Papworth, 2005 as cited in Muluken, 2006). Furthermore, teachers' heavy use of tests as a measure of pupils' performance encourage rote and superficial learning (Black and William (1998) cited in Muluken (2006).

Tests, assignments, examination, quiz, projects, presentations and questioning were the most widely used tools of continuous assessment (table 4) whereas participation in class, group reflections, discussions, portfolio assessment and term paper were types which were rarely used as tools of continuous assessment. On the contrary, self-assessment, observation, interview, peer assessment, attendance, role-playing, fieldwork /practical work and homework have never been used as tools of continuous assessment by any of the instructors.

Conclusions

On the basis of the findings, the following conclusions were drawn:

- Instructors at St. Mary's University College seem to have better understanding about the concept of continuous assessment. Furthermore, it was found out that the majority of the instructors have got a reasonable insight into the various functions of continuous assessment.
- Although participants of the study reported that they frequently evaluated the students' performance, it was explored that instructors gave only two or three tests for a course in a semester. Thus, it appeared reasonable to conclude that participants of the study did not practice continuous assessment though they were aware of its importance. Along with this, instructors listed down the potential factors that hamper them in the implementation of continuous assessment. These are large class size, shortage of time, lack of commitment, tight schedule, broad course content and teaching load.
- Though the participants claimed that they used various tools of continuous assessment, the data showed that they employed only the most traditional instruments such as tests and examinations. Since human competence is intricate and diversified, it cannot be easily assessed by a single form of assessment. But, the study found out that teachers mainly used testing as a major assessment

technique. In addition to this, there are certain assessment tools, which have never been used by the instructors. The traditional mode of assessment in which they passed through might have influenced teachers in practicing limited assessment techniques.

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